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ABSTRACT

Experiences gleaned from teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to Soviet Jewish refugees in San Diego, California, revealed many Soviet misconceptions about U.S. culture, as well as a keen intellectual curiosity, and an eagerness for knowledge. Classroom occurrences illustrate the characteristics of this group. Student attitudes and statements showed the extent of institutionalized anti-semitism in Soviet society and the degree to which Soviet Jews feel excluded and are subject to open hostility, even since Glasnost. Some students were intimidated by the cultural diversity and relative openness of American society. Individual freedom and the wide range of personal choices available to U.S. residents, in both home life and employment, were surprising and confusing. Some classroom instructional techniques were successful and some were not. In the U.S.S.R., priority is given to written communication in English, and oral language instruction or instruction in English is given less attention. Students were uncomfortable with English-only instruction, all-oral instruction, instruction without immediate correction, acceptance of common usage over "correct" usage, and open-ended language practice in which personal response is elicited. Experimentation revealed that the most useful teaching techniques were group-oriented or cooperative and were highly structured. A typical class schedule and lists of resources are appended. (MSE)

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NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND:

ESL with Soviet Jews

by

Gail Feinstein Forman

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Notes From the Underground: ESL with Soviet Jews

On March 27, 1989, I began teaching an ESL class of newly arrived Russian-Jewish refugees and had to throw out all my preconceived notions of teaching ESL. Many of my tried and true techniques just didn't work--and some things seemed to work in this class that never worked in other classes before

I found that due to the lack of accurate information available in the U.S.S.R., many Soviet students had misconceptions about the U.S.--and especially U.S. culture These misconceptions appeared to create some tension in and resistance by these students to our typical, student-centered, competancy-based, "message over form" ESL classrooms. In time, it was possible to overcome these barriers and see beyond the Soviets' rough exterior to a very warm, caring, yet terribly perplexed interior. They had a keen intellectual curiosity and literally devoured the lessons I taught They were hungry for knowledge, for information, and for a freedom they still couldn't yet completely comprehend They were indeed a challenging and highly motivated group of students

In this article, I've chosen a few examples of actual classroom occurrences and discussions in the hope that other teachers can gain more understanding of the background and culture of the new Soviet immigrant students. In addition, I hope the examples will help to explain why the classroom expectations of the Soviet students are considerably different from immigrants of other nations arriving recently in the U.S. I am also sharing the teaching techniques and materials that worked best for the classes I taught, but I encourage readers to be open to other teaching strategies and techniques.

The ESL class I taught was part of a specially conceived project designed to assist nearly 1000 Soviet Jews planning to settle in San Diego. These were students who brought with them the consequences of centuries-old, government-sponsored antisemitism. In the Soviet Union, all people are inextricably linked to and identified by their ethnic group or republic. Feelings of being marked and separate are reinforced on passports which identify people not by their country of origin or citizenship(Russian), but by their ethnic-religious ancestry (Jewish). In fact, antisemitism is so naturally a part of Soviet society that while discussing its possible causes one day in class, a

university-educated student assured everyone that antisemitism is "genetic"--people are born with it!".

It is an ironic consequence of Glasnost that more open expression of opinions has permitted more open hostility and violence against ethnic minorities, including Jews. The fears of many Soviet Jews who have emigrated unfortunately have been corroborated by reports coming out the U.S.S.R. describing violent attacks on Jews and their homes.

Being Jewish in the USSR automatically means discrimination in employment, education and politics. In many cities, Jews are usually not permitted to run for or hold public office. There are Jewish quotas at universities and training schools. Promotion is often difficult or impossible on the job where harrassment of Jews is not only tolerated but also encouraged. Even if Jews do rise to prestigious positions within Soviet society or on the job, they almost always feel like outsiders, not in the mainstream and very vulnerable to the whims of the boss or other employees.

In the Soviet Union, there is very little social mixing of different ethnic groups. In some cases, social separation is government

sanctioned and historically based--as in the case of Soviet Jews. For this reason, many Russians are astonished and intimidated by the cultural diversity and heterogeneity of American culture. They are surprised to see people of different races, cultures, economic groups, and different religions socialize together--both outside and inside the classroom. A poignant example of this occurred when a colleague of mine gave invitations to all her Russian students to attend her wedding, set to take place in a Baptist church. On several occasions, our bilingual Russian-speaking aide -- as well as individual students in that class -- would come to me privately for assurance that it was indeed okay for Jews to go into a church and not be in danger.

These types of fears and suspicions are often deep-seated and difficult to dispel. This was very apparent in the first group of Russian refugees I taught. Each day, we played a sort of "cat and mouse" game about opening and closing the classroom window. First, I would open the window to get fresh air. Then one student or another would wait for me to turn my back and write on the blackboard; as soon as this happened, he or she would close the window. "A draft?" I thought. Well, not exactly. I found out later,

through an interpreter, that my students feared getting shot or attacked through the window--a fear they developed from watching Soviet TV programs about the U.S. They were also afraid to talk about anything important in front of an open window.

Here's another example. During one class session, we had a discussion about missing children. One student said that no Russian student in our class can understand how there can be such a thing as "missing children". "Where can you hide a child?" he asked. He assumed that here, as in the Soviet Union, everyone knows who lives in your house or apartment. "The authorities will know if there is a new child there," he added. "Someone will report it." He went on to explain that his sixty-five year old mother, greatly perplexed by the announcements of missing children on TV, has taken on the mission to find "missing children"; she collects pictures of children from milk cartons and looks out for them whenever she leaves her house. "We think it must be like in Russia. The government steals the children and uses them for medical experiments".

Many Soviets--and most Soviet Jews--have had little opportunity to exercise personal freedom or make choices about their lives in

education, housing or employment. They are tracked by the government throughout their school career and after high school go to a government training school often not of their own choosing. Married couples usually live with one set of parents in cramped quarters before being assigned a private apartment sometimes years later. After the employment training (or in some cases university education), Soviets are given a job. These decisions are often made for them by government bureaucrats and cannot be changed, except in very unusual circumstances and often at great risk to the individuals involved.

The students in my class are often surprised and confused by the range of personal choices available to us here in the U.S. Many appear to have difficulty conceptualizing the very <u>possibility</u> of having more than one choice and that the exercise of personal freedoms and rights is actually encouraged by law. Here is a striking example of this: One of my class sessions was devoted to a problem-solving lesson about a woman who had been fired from her job because her boss found out about and disapproved of her sharing an apartment with her boyfriend without benefit of marriage. I had come to class prepared

to elicit maybe six to eight possible solutions to this problem. I was in for a big surprise! All twenty-one students in class that day agreed there was only one solution: leave the job and try to get another one. Everyone thought it wasn't a fair solution, especially since the person was an excellent employee who had worked on the job for several years and had a very good salary and benefits package. "What about fighting back?" I asked. "It's not possible," they responded, nearly in unison, reflecting a fatalism common to Soviet life.

Their trepidation of making personal choices emerged frequently in lessons about employment in the U.S. There is very little personal incentive needed for getting a job in the U.S.S.R. Promotion selections are frequently made by the "who you know" network or the worker's relationship to the Communist Party. There are no resumes, job applications, or even job interviews as we know them in the U.S. In general, jobs in the Soviet Union are assigned acording to the needs of the system(sometimes arbitrarily) and often have no bearing on one's training or educational background. An individual's personality or character is rarely considered a condition of employment, as it is

in the U.S. In addition, the majority of my students had only one job or worked in only one job location since they started working. The mobility of the U.S. workforce creates great insecurity and sometimes fear in many of my students. Although many refugees from the U.S.S.R. didn't like their jobs, they *did* like the job security the government guaranteed and especially the government-sponsored pensions that took effect when women were fifty-five years old and men were sixty. It is easy to understand the sense of insecurity and fear many Soviets feel when faced with the highly competitive U.S. job market.

There is also a humorous side to the subject of employment in the U.S.S.R. Any ESL teacher who works with recently-arrived Russian immigrants will find out sooner or later that ninety per-cent of the time the automatic response to the question "What did you do in your country?" is "engineer". An entire book could be written on the subject! "What kind of engineer?" you might ask earnestly. The answer is truly a variation on a theme: "economic engineer" or "cigarette engineer" or "hairstylist engineer" or "tugboat engineer" or.... There are, in fact, real engineers with highly trained skills and

abilities--chemical engineers, electrical engineers, computer engineers--,but almost everyone (no matter what one's profession) will include the magic word "engineer" in their job title. Are you wondering about "economic engineer"? I thought at first that I had ten economists in my class, but I was mistaken. After exploring their job duties and responsibilities with these students, I suggested to them that the U.S. equivalent of "economic engineer" was "bookkeeper"!

PROGRAM NOTES:

ESL WITH SOVIET JEWS--WHAT WORKED AND WHAT DIDN'T

The techniques used to teach English to adults in the U.S.S.R and the U.S. differ widely In the U.S.S.R., the priority of the English class is comprehension of written texts and the development of writing skills The study of the spoken language is secondary in importance. Oral techniques to teach English in the U.S.S.R. consist

mainly of rote oral repetitions and teacher corrections of pronunciation and grammatical errors. There is only one "correct" way to say something in English. (There is also very little spoken English in the classroom; often the teaching of English and teacher explanations are done in the Russian language.) With set expectations of how an English class should be conducted, Russian students are often unprepared to enter our present-day ESL classrooms. Here are a few examples:

--Since the Russians are used to explanations and teaching done in the Russian language, they often feel insecure at first in the "only-English" environment.

--A large percentage of Russian students just entering my ESL class ask me to write everything I say to them on the blackboard so that they can read it!

--Many new Russian students are so shocked that I don't interrupt a student who is speaking in class to correct mistakes that *they* go ahead and

do it for me!

--Russian students tend to resist the concept of "common usage" as acceptable speech and will fish for weeks looking for the *one* right way to say something

--Reviews and practice of grammar and vocabulary that are structured yet open-ended often present problems for Russian students They will often grope for the one correct answer, not realizing that what is being asked for is a personal response within the structure. In other words, thinking for themselves, not rote memorization.

It was against this backdrop of wide cultural differences and expectations that we began to develop a program to meet the needs of these students by modifying our existing ESL program. It is an ongoing process, and trial and error play a large role in determining the most appropriate materials and techniques for this special program. Although the two ESL classes in this program were homogeneous groups of Russian immigrants, I think much of what we

have learned in putting together the program can be effectively applied in heterogeneous classes as well

From March, 1989 through December, 1989, our ESL program for Russian refugees consisted of one multi-level ESL class. In January, 1990, after receiving an additional influx of refugees, we added a second ESL instructor and divided the group into two classes. The new teacher taught the beginning level, and I taught the intermediate-advanced level At any one time, we had between 35-55 Russian immigrants attending these classes. The classes met for fifteen hours per week, Monday-Friday, 9 AM-Noon in two classrooms at the San Diego Jewish Community Center.

The nature and focus of these two classes were clearly different from one another. The beginning class generally had adults over sixty years old who would, most likely, not be looking for a job. They had high literacy skills but very little English background. The intermediate-advanced group consisted of adults 18-55 years old who were strong candidates for employment. They also had high literacy skills and some background in English, but their oral communication skills were very poor. Both the beginning level teacher and I

concurred that the groups' biggest strengths were their reading and writing skills and their weakest areas were their listening and speaking skills.

By week and by semester, the general ESL program ar East San Diego Center is divided into both survival and functional units and their respective language competencies. The beginning ESL class followed the schedule for the survival units, while the intermediate-advanced class used a more functional approach. In both classes, an unusually heavy emphasis was placed on cultural orientation due to the lack of accurate information about the U.S. available in the Soviet Union.

The core texts and materials used in the beginning ESL class were fairly standard for the ESL beginning level program at the East San Diego Center. Texts most used were: Expressways I (and tapes), B.A.S.E., Personal Stories 1 and 2, English That Works 1, and Ready? Listen! for listening. At first, these students had difficulty adjusting to predominantly oral rather than textual techniques for language learning, but in time they got used to it and were very successful in learning English with these techniques.

The intermediate-advanced class was the more intensive of the two classes, due largely to the time limitation of the four month assistance program (Soviet Jewish refugees were supported by the local and federal government for only a four-month period.) After student needs were assessed, we concentrated most on the following three areas:

(1) Survival units on health; telephone; banking; driving; and the rules of the road.

(2) Employment orientation--working in the U.S. job market; getting a job; keeping a job; job applications and resumes; and standard ESL materials used for most immigrant groups. The idea and reality of a consumer-based economy often presents problems for the Soviets. It is so different in the U.S.S.R. that I needed to devote a whole unit to this concept of appropriate language and social interchange with customers.

(3) Cultural orientation. Some high-interest subjects were: U.S. state and federal laws; U.S. govern-

ment; U.S. cultural diversity; U.S. social customs and holidays; rights and responsibilities of citizenship; minority and women's rights; women's health care; police powers and citizen rights; and safety at home and while driving.

The core texts I used--and those which proved most popular with the students--were: Expressways II(and tapes), Azar's Fundamentals of English Grammar, It's Up To You, Contact USA, Person To Person, Book II, and Speak Up (for listening practice). I also used local newspaper articles as supplements to the above texts. (The concept of an editorial and opinion section of the newspaper was new to my students.) In addition, I made liberal use of Decisions I and II, The Culture Puzzle, and May I help You? (specifically for the unit on customer relations.) [**Note**: The resources I have mentioned are the most common and readily available to ESL teachers. I have also attached a supplementary list of resources that can provide a more in-depth look at this group of immigrants and additional materials to help round-out the ESL programs targeted for them.]

After much experimentation, I found that the most effective ESL

techniques were group-oriented or cooperative in nature, such as Cooperative Reading and Listening, Problem-solving, and Language Experiences. Although these techniques put a great demand on the individual student's oral communication skills, most seemed to welcome the challenge as long as they were in a group. Overall, I found that they shied away from unscripted public exposure exercises, such as role-playing. They were so reluctant to participate in short, oral small talk reviews of the previous lessons--such as the standard "What did you do this past weekend?"--that I finally eliminated the oral part and began each class with a written review. The students appeared most comfortable and participated most readily in a very tightly-controlled and structured class framework.

Limitations of space preclude my listing of all the techniques that never worked(!), but here are a few of these usually very popular and well-known techniques frequently used in adult ESL classes:

(1) Jazz chants: this crowd-pleasing, hand-clapping review just never made it for these folks!

(2) Vocabulary games (other than crossword puzzles):

"(Gulp!) Child's play! No concentration games for us!"

(3) Standard oral small-talk warm-ups:

Teacher: "Sergei, what did you do this past weekend?"

Sergei: "What do you mean by that? Why do you want to know?"

(4) Oral review of lesson from day before:

Student: "Why are you doing that? We did it before!"

I hope the sharing of my experience will be helpful to those of you now--or in the future--who work with Soviet refugees. Of course, this is a tale of only one person; what worked for me may not work for all. Perhaps, as teachers, we can all take inspiration from my sage Soviet Ukranian grandfather who, when faced with problems and conflicts having no clear-cut answers (as is often true in our classrooms) always advised, "Make the best".

P.S.: It works!

APPENDIX I

Below is a sample of how I scheduled a typical three hour class period. Of course, I often deviated from this general plan when student interests and needs required an alternative schedule.

9:00-9:10 AM: Written warm-up usually consisting of previous day's grammar or conversation exercise.

9:10-9:20 AM: Oral introduction to new grammar or conversation lesson.

9:20-9:50 AM: Student oral practice of new lesson.

9:50-10:00 AM: Written practice worksheets or homework or listening exercise (Speak Up)

10:00-10:30 AM: Review previous employment-related lesson and/or introduce new employment-related lesson. (It's Up To You, May I Help You?, English That Works II).

10:30-10:50 AM: BREAK

10:50-11:00 AM: Review of previous day's cultural orientation

lesson (Contact USA, The Culture Puzzle, and newspapers).

11:00-11:10 AM: Introduce new cultural orientation lesson orally or as a reading.

11:10-11:50 AM: Student participation in reading, writing, group discussion regarding new lesson.

11:50-Noon: Wrap-up; Review homework, dictation, etc.

APPENDIX II

Bibliography of Materials Referred To

Basic Adult Survival English
by Robert Walsh. Prentice-Hall, 1984.

Contact USA
by Paul Abraham and Daphne Mackey. Prentice-Hall, 1989.

The Culture Puzzle. Cross-Cultural Communication For English As A Second Language
by Deena R. Levine, Jim Baxter, and Piper McNulty. Prentice-Hall, 1987.

Decisions 1 and 2
by Barbara Bowers and John Godfrey. Dominie Press Ltd., 1985.

English That Works, I and II
by K. Lynn Savage, Mamie How and Ellen L. Young. Scott, Foresman Inc., 1982.

Expressways: English For Conversation, I and II
by Stephen J. Molinsky and Bill Bliss. Prentice-Hall, 1988.

Fundamentals of English Grammar
by Betty S. Azar. Prentice-Hall, 1985.

It's Up To You: Language Skills and Strategies For Getting A Job.
by Joanne Dresner and Kenneth Beck. Longman, 1980.

May I Help You?
by Heidi S. Wrigley. Addison-Wesley. 1987.

Person To Person, Books 1 and 2
by Richard Bycina. Oxford Press, 1985.

Personal Stories, Books 1, 2 and 3
by Kamla Devi Koch, Linda Mrowicki, and Arlene Ruttenberg. Linmore Publications, 1985.

Ready? Listen
by John Croes. Dormac Inc., 1988.

Speak Up: Beginning Pronunciation and Task Listening
by Cheryl Pavlik. Newbury House, 1985.

APPENDIX III

Supplementary Resources

Entering A New Culture. (in English and Russian)
by David Harris. Hebrew Immigration Aid Society(HIAS), 1989.

The Jewish World. (in English and Russian)
by David Harris. Hebrew Immigration Aid Society(HIAS), 1989.

The Russians.
by Hedrick Smith. Quadrangle Books, 1976.

Soviet Women: Walking A Tightrope.
by Francine du Plessix Gray. Doubleday, 1990.

Vocational ESL Curriculum For Russian Immigrants
Chicago Jewish Vocational Service (2800 West Sherwin Ave., Chicago, IL 60645), 1989